




Review

Reviewed Work(s): Language-Paradox-Poetics: A Chinese Perspective by James J. Y. Liu and Richard John Lynn

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have been eliminated to avoid repetition, thus making it possible to include a different theme. Since the early immigrants could not bring their wives to America, they resorted to brothels when the need arose. It is also probable that they practiced homosexuality among themselves. The homosexual theme affords possibility for further research.

The forty-six-syllable songs give the reader an overall picture of the early Chinese immigrants, their fears, loves, worries, and aspirations. *Songs* is no doubt a book indispensable to the field of Chinese ethnic studies, for it offers a thorough perspective of the emotional states of this specific group of Chinese immigrants. However, for the benefit of non-Chinese readers, the quality of the English translations could be improved. In some songs, the translation is too literal, while in others, it is done rather carelessly. The author's method of translation lacks consistency and, in some cases, accuracy. The footnotes for the Chinese and English versions of the poems are helpful, but again do not always appear when needed. For example, one is unable to tell whether the Chinese character from the second line on p. 101 is a printing error or if it only needs a footnote explaining a different usage. There are similar problems in the last line on p. 280 and in the third line on p. 221.

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Language—Paradox—Poetics: A Chinese Perspective. By James J. Y. Liu. Ed. by Richard John Lynn. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. xiii + 177 pp. $35.00.

Sandwiched between language and poetics in the title of this book, the term paradox literally resides at its very center, and obviously the late Professor James J. Y. Liu loved the term as well as the concept it refers to. "Thus, if poetry is a paradox," he wrote, "then poetics is a metaparadox, and my writing about poetics is a metametaparadox. Someone who then tried to deconstruct my writing would be engaging in a metametametaparadox. It is not my intention to start such an infinite regress—but it is not within my power to prevent it either!" (p. 38) Despite a certain ambiguity in the term "deconstruct," I take this statement to mean less to forestall criticism than to indulge in a sort of *jeu de la parole,* as Professor Liu realized himself that his could not be the last word on the subject and that it was impossible for him to prevent others from writing about his writing, or rather, about the problems of language and poetics. In reviewing this book, I must of course write about Liu's "metaparadox," but I have no intention to participate in the game of "infinite regress." What follows, then, are as much my own reflections on language and interpretation as my comments on James Liu's.

The inadequacy of language and how to overcome it has been a major concern shared by philosophers, mystics, and poets. They all dream about a language that can fully express whatever there is for transmission without jeopardizing the plenitude of meaning, the original completeness of thoughts, feelings, or experiences. They long for a clear, precise, and effective language purged of its opaqueness, its inherent limitations, its inextricable metaphoricity—an ideal language that mediates but does not attenuate the meaning, the content, or the signified through mediation. But as the language we use does not live up to the standard of such an ideal medium, philosophers and mystics find it less than perfect, complain about its uselessness, or even attempt to get rid of it altogether, while poets emphasize the significance of silence and advocate the view that "in poetry, the less is said, the more is meant" (p. xi). Inasmuch as philosophers, mystics, and poets use language to register its supposed inadequacy, however, the charge of inadequacy inscribes, of necessity, a contradiction, an irony or, as James Liu puts it, a paradox. By quoting a large number of philosophical and literary texts from different periods of time, Liu tries to define a "poetics of paradox" and writes persuasively about its consequences in the writing, reading, and interpretation of poetry in the Chinese tradition. Readers of his earlier works,

The Art of Chinese Poetry (Chicago, 1962), *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago, 1975), and *The Interlingual Critic* (Bloomington, 1982), know how extensively Professor Liu has covered the vast and complex field of Chinese poetry and poetics, and with what cogency and authority he has written on the history of Chinese criticism and its various concepts, assumptions, and orientations. In this new book, they can expect the same erudition, resourcefulness, and sagacity as they always find in his discussion of literature. And if in his earlier works James Liu surpassed others in writing in English about Chinese theories of literature, it is fair to say that he surpassed himself in his last book, which puts the Chinese literary tradition in a more focused overview that allows readers to see more clearly than before and appreciate more deeply, among other things, the importance of the influence of Laozi and Zhuangzi, the implications of the Taoist and Chan Buddhist linguistic skepticism, the emphasis on *hanxu* 含蓄 or fruitful ambiguity in Chinese poetry, and the kind of interpretive plurality so readily accepted in the tradition of Chinese literary criticism. In other words, this book does not just rehash Chinese literary theories its author already discussed in other works, but has a concentrated theme that highlights the hermeneutic implications of poetic language as it has been conceived of in the Chinese tradition and manifested in its poetry and poetics.

By juxtaposing Chinese and Western texts and suggesting "possible points of convergence between the traditional Chinese poetics of paradox and contemporary Western poetics and hermeneutics" (p. xi), Professor Liu clearly meant to write this book as an exercise in comparative poetics. Indeed, the interpretation of Chinese texts quoted in this book is evidently informed by the author's understanding of Western theories, and there is much insightful analysis of Chinese concepts and formulations and their Western counterparts with regard to both their convergence and divergence. The Chinese idea of *can shi* 參詩 or communing with poetry, for example, is found to share some basic assumptions with the phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity because both regard a literary text as a living presence, "an intersubjective intentional object," and both "assign an active role to the reader." (pp. 102, 103). The Chinese emphasis on "meaning beyond words" and its logical consequence, interpretive pluralism, are brought into comparison with Western concepts of indeterminacy and textual concretization, and discussions of Yan Yu, Wang Fuzhi, and the similarity of their views to those of Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser (pp. 103-08) are among the most persuasive and enlightening passages of this book, where Professor Liu proves himself to be a fine comparatist.

One can only wish that such fine comparisons were more fully developed and the theoretical presumptions of Chinese and Western concepts discussed in greater detail, for despite Richard Lynn's careful editing, the book still shows signs of haste, and its main argument often seems to jump from one quote to another without fully exploring their significance and implications. It is sad to think that Professor Liu did not have enough time to polish his last book and strengthen its argument; otherwise he could have eliminated the several weaknesses it contains. Having acknowledged the mitigating circumstances, however, I must go on to comment on the book itself as it now stands, especially where it seems to fall short of its own purpose, which, as the author states in the Introduction, is to define a "poetics of paradox." As this poetics is grounded in the nature of language itself, Liu begins his book by examining the "paradox of language" in its "two basic forms": (1) the contradiction between accusation of the inadequacy of language and the eloquence with which that accusation is made; and (2) the contradiction between the claim that silence can be a better expression than words and the fact that this claim itself is couched in words (pp. 3-4). It seems to me, however, that the two paradoxical forms are somewhat tautological, for they are basically saying the same thing, presenting only one side of the problem, i.e., the charge of the inadequacy of language in language. In such a formulation, the other side of language, i.e., its suggestiveness, its tremendous power of evocation, is unduly overlooked. For poets especially, it is this other side that is of great importance, since language is the very being of poetry, and great poets often successfully overcome the difficulty of articulation by deliberately leaving things unsaid, by indirect, suggestive expressions. The

suggestive side of language is of course crucial to Liu's ''poetics of paradox,'' as it actually constitutes a kind of substructure for his discussion of that poetics, but its importance is not properly emphasized in this book, and its evocative power is never clearly recognized and formulated as a counterbalance to the charge of linguistic inadequacy.

Even philosophers and mystics have to reclaim language after denouncing its uselessness. When Zhuangzi says that by using words as ''non-words'' 言不言 , one may speak all one's life without having said anything (*Yinde,* 75/27/6), he is not so much showing an "apparent despair" (p. 13) as making an ingenious move to reaffirm the value of language, and to acknowledge the inevitable metaphoricity of philosophical discourse. Moreover, Zhuangzi's point is not, as Liu suggests, that "there is no distinction between the two, between speaking and not speaking" (p. 13), but precisely that there *is* a crucial distinction between a naive belief in words as referring to real things and the awareness of the expediency and provisional nature of all verbal expressions. Zhuangzi seems to argue that once you know the use of words is provisional, you are freed, as it were, from the infatuation with words, and are thus capable of using words as "non-words" without falling into their traps. That may explain why, when challenged by Hui Shi that he does, after all, use a great deal of words despite his protest that words are useless, Zhuangzi replies that "you must know that they are useless, and then you can talk about their use" (*Yinde,* 74/26/31). The same is true with Laozi's use of language, and here again I find Liu's discussion somehow missed the point. Laozi says that "One who knows does not speak; One who speaks does not know." The author maintains that this is similar to Epimenides' statement that "All Cretans are liars" (p. 6). Since Laozi has spoken in his book, Liu argues, "therefore his words cannot be taken as true, including the statement 'one who speaks does not know,' in which case this statement cannot be taken as proof that Laozi does not know" (p. 7). For all the ingenious use of paradoxical structure in syntax, however, Liu's argument is merely chopping logic, since "one who speaks does not know" has nothing to do with the truthfulness of what is spoken, and "not knowing" is simply not equivalent to "not true." As knowledge does not necessarily mean truth, it does not follow that because Laozi has spoken, therefore his words must be untrue. In fact, not only are knowledge and truth two different categories, but for Laozi the Taoist philosopher, finite knowledge may well be an obstacle to the infinite, undifferentiated, ultimate truth. Hence his wish to "eliminate the sage and abandon the wise" 絕聖棄智 (xix, 43), and "eliminate learning so that there will be no worries" 絕學無憂 (xx, 44). In Zhuangzi's allegory of Knowledge seeking the meaning of *tao,* it is repeatedly made clear that knowledge is inferior to ignorance, that "not knowing is deep, knowing is shallow; not knowing is inside, knowing is outside" (*Yinde,* 60/22/60). Indeed, the emphasis on the limitations of knowledge does not just characterize the Taoist philosophy, for Socrates also considers the awareness of one's own ignorance as the highest form of wisdom. A Delphic oracle proclaimed Socrates to be the wisest of all men, but Socrates insists that the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing. Having discovered that all kinds of men are likely to be ignorant of their own ignorance, he comes to the conclusion that what Apollo is really saying is that "The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless" (*Apology,* 23b). Perhaps the difference here is that Socrates lays more emphasis on *knowing* one's own ignorance, while the Taoist philosophers, speaking more hyperbolically, privilege *ignorance* itself.

In his discussion of the Chinese concept of language and what he calls graphocentrism, Professor Liu commends Fenollosa and Pound for having "sensed intuitively that Chinese characters offered a possible alternative to Western logocentrism" (p. 20). Of course, he is aware of the self-contradiction between this commendation and his critique of Fenollosa and Pound in his earlier works, but he assures the reader that "There has been only a shift of emphasis because of changed circumstances" (p. 19), as he is now presenting Chinese thinking, especially Taoism, as "a useful counterweight to Western logocentrism, phallocentrism, and the metaphysics of presence" (p. 21). I certainly agree with Professor Liu that since Chinese writing is nonphonetic, phonocentrism does not seem to inhabit the Chinese mind, but I am not sure how legitimately

he can speak for Derrida, asserting that Derrida's ''real target'' is not logocentrism but phonocentrism (p. 23). Liu mentions an article of mine and rightly sees that I differ from him ''in viewing logocentrism as universal and not limited to Western thinking,'' but, he continues, ''If we take the term in the narrower sense of phonocentrism, then Zhang may modify his views'' (p. 24). The problem is that logocentrism simply cannot be taken as the same as phonocentrism, and that, as I understand it, logocentrism is a matter of philosophy rather than of linguistics. Phonocentrism may not be a problem in the way the Chinese think about language, but there is obviously a logocentric metaphysical hierarchy in Chinese philosophy and poetics in thinking about *yi* 意, *yan* 言 , and *shu* 書 , as evidenced by that famous passage in the appendix to the *Book of Changes* (*Zhou Yi yinde*, 44/繫上/12), or in Lu Ji's preface to *Wen fu*, where the difficulty of poetic articulation is clearly put in the frame of such a hierarchy, for "constantly one feels that meaning 言 does not match with things 物 , and words 意 do not convey meaning." Liu rightly describes Western phonocentrism as "the bias in favor of oral speech over writing," but it is important to realize that such a bias is not the only attitude towards language in the West, for there is also what Foucault calls the "absolute privilege on the part of writing," an attitude influential since the Renaissance, which sees the spoken word as "merely the female part of language," while "Writing, on the other hand, is the active intellect, the 'male principle' of language. It alone harbours the truth" (*The Order of Things*, pp. 38, 39). Here again, a rigid opposition between graphocentrism and phonocentrism, the East and the West, the Self and the Other, turns out to be reductionist and untenable.

In examining the "paradox of interpretation," Professor Liu shows convincingly how Chinese critics managed to read literary works in various ways and to escape from the predominant modes of "Confucian moralism or Mencian intentionalism" (p. 97). But having forcefully demonstrated the flexibility and interpretive pluralism in the Chinese critical tradition, he surprisingly goes back to Mencian intentionalism and finds it "compatible with Gadamer's theory of the fusion of horizons" (p. 117)! If Mencius' command to "know the people and discuss the age" eventually serves an intentionalist purpose of "recovering what the author intended to mean" (p. 96), if it constitutes the central tenet of "historicism," which, according to Liu, "refers to the attitude that, in order to understand a text produced in another age, we must assume the mentality of a reader of that age" (p. 116), then, nothing can be farther apart from each other than this kind of "historicism" and Gadamer's hermeneutics, because the whole point of Gadamer's critique of romantic historicism lies precisely in rejecting authorial intention as the goal and measure of all interpretations. "Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way," Gadamer puts it very clearly. "The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history" (*Truth and Method*, p. 263). Given the large number of shared concerns and points of convergence between traditional Chinese criticism and Gadamerian hermeneutics, which this book precisely tries to demonstrate, the mismatch of Mencius with Gadamer seems especially regrettable.

Although the author of this book is extremely knowledgeable in Western literature and methods of literary analysis, sometimes his comment on Western works quoted in the book does fail to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding. One example is his observation on the words of the three witches in *Macbeth*, "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (I.i.11). Though it may have various meanings, Liu observes, in this particular context, "the word 'fair' means 'clear' or 'sunny' " (pp. 108-9). But if he knew that thematically, equivocation is at the heart of this tragedy, that Macbeth falls a prey to "th' equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth" (V.v.42), he would probably not be so sure of the exact meaning of the word "fair." That line of the three witches sounds even more devilishly equivocal when we hear its echo in the very first words Macbeth speaks when he comes onto the stage: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I.iii.38). In the context of Shakespeare's great tragedy, the repetition of "fair" and "foul" cannot be a

mere coincidence, and each of the two words is so closely woven into the dense texture of the whole play in relation to its central themes that it becomes impossible to reduce its meaning to its immediate linguistic context and determine it in a simple manner. That is to say, the equivocal line quoted from *Macbeth* could have been more profitably compared with the various examples of Chinese poems for the discussion of indeterminacy, had the author been more attentive to the analysis of Western texts as he was to Chinese ones.

Evidently, for a serious study in comparative poetics, it is absolutely imperative that the author should be constantly sensitive to the nuances and implications of the texts and theories he draws upon in different languages and literatures, and that all his comparisons and discussions should contribute to the illumination of the theoretical points he tries to make. When such a criterion is applied to *Language–Paradox–Poetics,* I am afraid that it does not seem to measure up to all our high expectations. But I may be wrong, or I may be asking too much of this book which does not, after all, claim to offer us a comparative poetics but "a kind of Chinese poetics" (p. xi), only moderately "paving the way for a genuinely comparative poetics, free from both Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism" (p. xii). Put in such a perspective, then, this book has admirably attained its goal, and as a pioneer work in dealing with the hermeneutic implications of the Chinese concept of language and the tradition of Chinese poetics, it opens up a most stimulating and promising area in the study of Chinese literature and literary theory, pointing to the direction of further explorations. No one interested in Chinese poetry and Chinese criticism can afford to ignore the important questions the book addresses or the valuable insight it provides, and any further study along the line it has delineated will have to take its argument into serious consideration.

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Selective Guide to Chinese Literature, 1900-1949–Volume I: The Novel. Edited and with an introduction by Milena Doleželová-Velingerova. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988. 238 pp. Indices to authors & pseudonyms, publishers, journals, and series. List of contributors. $40.

Selective Guide to Chinese Literature, 1900-1949–Volume II: The Short Story. Edited and with an introduction by Zbigniew Słupski. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988. 300 pp. Indices to authors & pseudonyms, publishers, journals, and series. List of contributors. $54.

A group of twenty-three scholars affiliated with the European Association of Chinese Studies met in the autumn of 1979 at Reisensberg Castle, where they formulated a blueprint for a four-volume set of handbooks on Chinese literature from the turn of the century through 1949. The volumes on the novel and short story both came out in 1988, while the latter two guides on poetry and drama are forthcoming.

Each volume covers approximately a hundred full-length works, such as novels or plays, or else the same number of collections of shorter works, such as anthologies of short stories or poems. Though the editorial board points to overall literary quality as the major criterion for choosing the works for inclusion in the guides, works of dubious intrinsic merit have sometimes been included when of sufficient "social impact and significance" (I, x). Hu Yepin's 胡也頻 *The Light Is Before Us* and Jiang Guangci's 蔣光慈 *The Young Wanderer,* two of the selections covered in Volume I, would certainly fall into the latter category.

The editors have aimed at a broad rather than a narrow readership, reaching out to the general reader along with specialists in Chinese literature and comparative literature. The contributors–mostly Europeans but including colleagues in North America, China, and Hong